



PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

BRIEF

Stress Management Tools for State Patrol Officers

Law enforcement officers across the country experience high levels of stress, which can affect their health, psychological well-being, and job performance. Phase I of this study (available at <http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/library/research/reports/policy.htm>) surveyed sworn officers of the WisDOT Division of State Patrol to determine their stress levels and sources of stress. Researchers found that 51% experienced high levels of stress, with troopers and upper management most affected.

What's the Problem?

Although stress pervades law enforcement organizations nationwide, there is little published information on the best way to deliver stress management programming to sworn personnel as a high-risk employee group. Further research was needed to develop, implement and evaluate a plan for mitigating stress in sworn officers.

Research Objectives

This study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of several training approaches to reducing stress in sworn officers. WisDOT could then implement a program to provide stress management tools and techniques to DSP officers, and evaluate the program's effectiveness.

Methodology

WisDOT's Employee Assistance Program worked with DSP managers and union representatives to evaluate four training programs aimed at reducing officer stress. They selected a program developed by Dr. Kevin Gilmartin, a 20-year law enforcement veteran with a doctorate in clinical psychology.

Gilmartin's program first teaches about the tendency of officers to overidentify with the law enforcement role as their careers progress. The program then provides tools and techniques for balancing work and personal life roles, and the physical and psychological demands of law enforcement.

The daylong program was presented to 477 officers in groups of about 35 to 40 during DSP's 2004 in-service training. Group discussion focused on difficult-to-discuss topics associated with law enforcement stress management, including spouse/partner issues, unhealthy coping behaviors, and concerns about the medical impacts of unmanaged stress. Officers were given the opportunity to talk freely with their peers about stress. They learned techniques for balancing the multiple roles in their lives, managing personal time, maintaining a healthy diet, and making time for exercise. At the conclusion, participants completed program evaluation forms and were given resource packets to take home for further review and to share with family members.

Researchers hypothesized that officers who left with a written plan for making healthy behavioral changes would be more successful. About half of the trainees were asked to develop a plan based on Gilmartin's nine "life areas" (including family relationships, friendships, spirituality and hobbies). The effectiveness of the single-day training was measured through participants' success in implementing the concepts they learned. All participants completed a 70-item questionnaire based on the life areas at the start of training, and were asked to complete it again six weeks and three months afterward.

Results

Responses to the pretraining questionnaires indicated that on average, officers were not where they wanted to be in any of Gilmartin's life areas. In general, the greater their seniority, the less satisfied officers were. Of all job titles, troopers were the least satisfied.

Participation in the follow-up surveys was not sufficient to evaluate whether the program helped effect significant behavioral changes. However, program participants rated the training highly on their

Project Director



"Officers learned to recognize unhealthy stress levels, and gained awareness of the help that is available to them through EAP."

—Sue Hunter

WisDOT Employee
Assistance Program
sue.hunter@
dot.state.wi.us

Project Manager



"The training provided officers with tools to help balance their work and home lives and manage stress."

—Deanne Boss
WisDOT Employee Assistance Program
deanne.boss@dot.state.wi.us



Officers gave high marks to the stress management training program, which included tools and techniques for balancing participants' work and personal lives.

evaluations: 88% of the officers gave the program an 8 or higher on a scale of 10. When asked about future stress management training efforts, 30% of officers suggested that programming also be developed for spouses, partners and families of officers. Nine percent suggested training for police communications operators, and 4% for new recruits.

The results of this research and the Phase I study indicate that one-time training events do not adequately address officers' stress management needs. DSP managers who reviewed the study data recommended establishing an ongoing stress management program for sworn personnel, including:

- Developing a wellness program.
- Focusing more attention on the existing critical incident program, which helps officers deal with incidents such as shootings, hostage situations, and crime scenes with death or serious injuries.
- Making written materials available on critical incident and family stress.
- Addressing the issue of suicide risk.

Implementation and Further Research

The stress management training evaluated in this study was used during training for police communications operators in March and April 2005. The Gilmartin training materials were used in a Wisconsin Police Corps recruit class on stress and depression, and may be used with the next DSP recruit class.

WisDOT EAP managers have proposed Phase III of this study, in which Gilmartin would provide a family training program at the district offices in fall 2005. Research has shown that family members who use stress management services are better able to understand the demands of police work and develop ways to cope with stress as a family, and are often instrumental in helping to prevent and reduce officer stress. WisDOT could then evaluate the success of the family training program, which would be EAP's first program for families and could lead to future family programming.

Benefits

DSP officers make life and death decisions every day that affect Wisconsin highway users. This study successfully introduced nearly 500 officers to effective tools and techniques for reducing stress and enhancing mental and physical wellness. Officers whose emotional needs have been met are likely to be more alert and better able to make the quick decisions required of them.

In addition, providing this training enabled EAP staff to expand their relationship with DSP employees, increasing the likelihood that officers will take advantage of EAP resources in the future.

This brief summarizes Project 0092-03-01, "Examining Stress Levels of DSP Enforcement Personnel and Intervention Techniques—Phase II," produced through the Wisconsin Department of Transportation Research, Development & Technology Transfer Program, 4802 Sheboygan Ave., Madison, WI 53707.

Nina McLawhorn, Research Administrator